

San Jose de Gracia Church
Trampas, Taos County

HABS No. NM-61

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH - DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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SAN JOSÉ DE GRACIA CHURCH

ADDRESS: TRAMPAS, NEW MEXICO
TAOS COUNTY

OWNER: ROMAN CATHOLIC ARCH DIOCESE OF NEW MEXICO

OCCUPANT: SAME

USE: PARISH CHURCH

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The church of San José de Gracia is probably the best preserved of the eighteenth century Spanish Colonial churches built in New Mexico. Historical documentation on the structure is relatively complete, and the edifice has not been "modernized" as have most of the other parish or mission churches of the area.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History: Construction of the church began sometime after 1760 and had been finished, save for a few minor details such as the railing of the choir loft, by April of 1776. No exact information exists on the point, but one can assume that the work was done gradually over the fifteen year period by Spanish settlers of the village.

Constructed of adobe, the most fugitive of building materials, and covered by a wooden roof overlaid with a thick layer of clay, the structure has been necessarily subject to constant upkeep. Walls must be constantly replastered with adobe mud and the earth-covered wooden roofs rot out and have to be partially replaced every 50 to 75 years. The main lines of the church, however, have changed very little since 1776.

Tree ring datings for two roof beams give the dates 1791 and 1812; this suggests that a new roof was needed in the early nineteenth century. Of recent record is a new roof in 1932 and a built-up asphalt roof covering added over the earth fill in 1955. (1) A new coat of mud plaster was applied in November, 1961, after the HABS photographs were made.

Central to its historical importance is the fact that the church escaped the grotesque efforts at "modernization" under Bishop Lamy in the third quarter of the nineteenth century which destroyed the colonial character of so many other churches in the Rio Grande valley.

The church fabric bears certain evidences of the technological changes which overtook New Mexico after the area's annexation by the USA in 1848. Window glass soon became available through trade over the Santa Fe Trail as did cheaper and more abundant iron tools for working wood. Although the five windows and their positions mentioned in the 1776 inventory⁽²⁾ remain the same, their present size may be larger, and they are equipped with glass-filled sash rather than solid wooden shutters. Heated in winter by a pot-bellied stove - a Yankee import of course - the church still has not been electrified.

Historical Events: A patent to build a church dedicated to St. Joseph was granted by Bishop Tamarón, of the Diocese of Durango, Mexico, during his brief visit to the settlement of Santo Tomás Apostól del Rio de las Trampas on June 15, 1760.⁽³⁾ The size of the church-to-be was specified as 30 varas long by 15 wide, which corresponds roughly to the church's present dimensions. It was also agreed that the church be built within the protective walls of the village compound.⁽⁴⁾ Inasmuch as later that summer out-lying farms in the general area were devastated by raids by Commanche Indians, this seems not to have been a useless precaution.⁽⁵⁾

The church was practically finished at the time of the visit (April 20, 1776) of Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, who came to New Mexico on an inspection trip for the "provincial" of the Franciscan Province of New Spain (that is the Province of Mexico). This friar made a detailed report of his trip as well as a description and inventory of the contents of the Spanish parish and Indian mission churches that he visited. By referring to this report, one can see how little the church has changed.

Funds for the construction were solicited throughout New Mexico by Juan Argüello, a leading and elderly member of the village. The ritual objects of the parish at the time of the Dominguez visit were very limited. Many items necessary for the mass had to be carried over for the occasion from the mission church at Picuris pueblo. In 1775 the total income of the parish church from tithes and alms was 25 pesos 7 reales. At the time of the Dominguez visit Trampas consisted of only 63 families which numbered 278 Spanish inhabitants. The priest, Fray Andrés Claramonte, who shepherded the parish, lived at nearby Picuris Indian pueblo (eight miles distance) but visited the Spanish village at regular intervals.⁽⁶⁾

Later Trampas suffered from the same scarcity of clergy which affected other New Mexican rural communities. In Colonial times the parish as well as mission churches were staffed by Franciscan missionaries. When the missions were secularized and the friars forbidden to minister as the secular clergy in 1834, the shortage of clergy in New Mexico became acute. As no secular clergy arrived from old Mexico to replace the regular clergy, the spiritual leadership devolved upon lay leaders. This situation continued until the 1850's when the church in New Mexico was reorganized under Bishop Lamy.

Until the 1920's the Trampas area remained so isolated and its economy so retarded that it was unaffected by Yankee fashions of the late nineteenth century. It is to this cultural and economic isolation that the remarkable preservation of the church is due.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Description: A single nave plan 100 feet long by 52 feet wide* and constructed of adobe walls as great as six feet in thickness, the church has also transepts and a projecting apse. A small chapel to the right of the entrance (Epistle side) serves as the baptistry. The most striking architectural feature of New Mexican churches, and one well illustrated here at Trampas, is the transverse clearstory window placed above the roof of the nave. This window floods with light the altar area of an otherwise rather dark interior. The nave ceiling is 19'6" ~~feet~~ high, those of the transepts and sancturay are 22 ft.

No architectural decoration is added to these churches other than the paneled main entrance door, the simple wooden balcony on the facade and the carved corbels that support the ceiling beams on the interior. Rather crudely cut but with a strong profile, these wooden corbels are more elaborate at the crossing area where the dramatic contrasts in lighting accentuate the design.

Approached by a simple ladder, the wood-floored balcony above the main entrance serves as choir loft. The under side of the flooring here is decorated with simple painted designs - an unusual feature in New Mexico.

Another unusual feature of Trampas is the wood floor of the nave. This is made of hand-hewn slabs of wood set in rough frames five feet by two feet. Local talk has it that in times past this paneled floor was used for burials. The Dominguez report does not mention this feature.

Stylistic Consideration: The Trampas edifice, as other mission churches in New Mexico, clearly derives from the sixteenth century "Fortress Churches" constructed in old Mexico

* outside dimensions

by the mendicant orders. Franciscans, coming into New Mexico in the early seventeenth century, introduced the familiar church design which they had been using since the 1530's in Mexico. The basic characteristics of this style are: a single nave, polygonal apse, tall vertical massing of the church, restricted fenestration, a low-lying adjacent convent.(7)

The Trampas church, along with the other eighteenth century churches built in the Spanish (if not the Indian) villages of New Mexico, has transepts. The apse at Trampas is not polygonal but it is narrower than the nave. Both narrow rectangular apses and transepts are sometimes found in the Mexican prototypes. As Trampas was a "visita" (a parish administered by a priest living at another parish or mission), there is no "convento" (priest's house) as one finds in the Mexican "Fortress Churches" or in such missions in New Mexico as Acoma or Laguna where the priest resided.

But whereas the Mexican churches were built of stone and sometimes covered by elaborate Gothic vaults, the poverty and technological limitations of the New Mexican Indians restricted the church buildings of this area to simple wooden roofs and low-lying masses of adobe masonry.

Although the transverse clearstory window is a salient characteristic of New Mexican churches, it is rarely found in old Mexico. Examples do exist, however, as at the Franciscan church of Tlahuelipa (Hidalgo) or the Dominican church at Yautepec (Morelos).

Site: San José de Gracia church is located on the northeast side of an irregular plaza in the center of Trampas. All traces of the eighteenth century enclosing walls and the closely-built houses of the settlers have disappeared. Today the church stands free save for a decayed Penitente morada that abuts the right transept and apse. The atrium of the church is used for a graveyard and is surrounded by a low adobe wall. A handsome gate placed on line with the church's main entrance communicates with the lower plaza.

REFERENCES

1. Kubler, George; The Religious Architecture of New Mexico, Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs, 1940, p. 126.
2. Dominguez, Fray Francisco Atanasio, The Missions of New Mexico, trans. by Eleanor B. Adams and Fray Angelico Chavez, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1956, p. 100.
3. Ibid., p. 99.
4. Adams, Eleanor B., ed., Bishop Tameron's Visitation of New Mexico, 1760, Historical Society of New Mexico, Publications in History, vol. 15, Albuquerque, 1954, p. 55.

5. Dominguez, Op. Cit., p. 251.
6. Ibid., pp. 99-101.
7. Kubler, George, The Religious Architecture of Mexico in the Sixteenth Century, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1949, 2 vols.

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April 10 1962

Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, National Park Service

Addendum to
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Trampas
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National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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